

The Symbolic World of the Bilingual Child: Digressions on Language Acquisition, Culture and the Process of Thinking

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In this paper we explore the relationship between language acquisition, and the construction of a symbolic world. According to Bowers (1989) language is a collection of patterns regulating social life. This conception is close to that of Symbolic Interactionists (Charon, 1989) who see society as made up of interacting individuals who are symbol users. According to Shapiro (1977), learning different languages and cultures influences cognitive processes by exposing individuals to different values, beliefs and demands. How does this affect literacy in the schooling of immigrant children? There are two basic responses to this question. One response is that of Ferdman (1990) who sees the educational system as an equalizer that should help children in integration and adaptation to the major culture. Another response is the retentionalist position which aims to preserve the language and the culture of newcomers. Although, full participation in life is only possible with the acquisition of the language of the majority in which children live, it is very important to provide the possibility of learning the heritage language. This would help children to harmonize their symbolic world built out of internal and external symbols.

In this paper we discuss the relationship between language acquisition and the process of thinking within the symbolic worldview of bilingual children. Language as a symbolic medium influences the child's thought and S. Deri (1984), H. Gardner (1978), W.H.O. Schmidt (1973) and Nowak-Fabrykowski (1992).

In our own work, we have paid attention to the processes of symbolization and schooling. In research we found that children are exposed to an entire spectrum of symbols (Nowak-Fabrykowski, 1991). Some are introduced by language, others by the school and the country in which children are educated. Language employs a special kind of symbolism which encompasses all social

objects and actions, and which ultimately constructs the individual's cultural identity and perspective.

Research has shown the importance of analyzing the culture of a child in order to understand what material he/she uses in his/her thought process. Culture as the dominant factor influences his/her knowledge by importing values, norms and beliefs.

The process of second language education and socialization starts with the first words and concepts learned by the child and with the first experience brought by living in the new country and learning the new language. Many authors stress that the process of teaching children is conditioned by the culture of the society. In order to understand a child and his/her learning we have to analyze the context and influence of culture on the child's process of thinking, since the culture stimulates the behavior of children and influences their learning by exposing them to different values, norms and demands. Celebration of traditional holidays and events help the child to integrate and understand cultural symbols prevalent in their society. By learning the language and

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meaning of expressions, the child associates and assimilates different values and norms prevalent in the "new" society.

Culture and Thought Process

In considering a definition of "culture", different approaches can be taken. In Spradley's (1979) definition a culture is considered as a system of meaningful symbols. According to Spradley (1979), children in every society discover the meaning of symbols with great ease, and this process accelerates especially with learning the language. Each child is born into a society where he/she learns to recognize the patterns of behavior and the way of life called culture. This culture is a shared perspective among individuals, who are socialized through the integration of different symbols and through interaction inside the society (Charon, 1989). The process of teaching children is conditioned by the culture of a given society. For example the research of Whiting and Child (1953) has examined the different approaches for training of walking and sleeping in Africa and in America. In Africa mothers sleep with their babies and there is no pressure to quickly teach babies to sleep separately in a different room. Also since children are carried all the time by their mothers in the snuggle sack there is no pressure of teaching them to quickly sit or walk. Those different approaches influence behavior of children at an early age. Culture stimulates the behavior of children and influences learning by exposing children to different values, norms and demands. As noticed by Sara Harness (1980): "*To ignore the role of cultural context in describing the child can lead to a lack of differentiation between the structure of the child's own development and the structure of his or her environment.*" (p. 5).

Since culture and language both have an influence on cognitive process, it is important to analyze selected statements related to the research on language and cognition. For example, when Cole and Scribner (1974)

asked questions concerning human cognitive development they analyzed whether the cognitive process of people reared in different cultural settings was different and how it differed. They found for example, that the Kamayura Indians of Brazil do not make a distinction between blue and green (research of H. Werner 1961).

In South Africa the natives asked to account for some event, begin their accounts with some other event greatly preceding that event (Bartlett, 1970). Cole and Scribner (1974) concluded that:

" Perception, memory and thinking all develop as part of the general socialization of a child and are inseparably bound up with the patterns of activity, communication and social relations into which it enters." (p.9).

The role of culture was the major factor in differences in cognition measured in most cross-cultural studies. Although we find in the literature a justification for differences of thought (the existence of so called "prelogical thought" in primitive culture in the theory of Levy-Bruhl), Structuralism, as represented by the work of the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss (1963) suggests that, there are no differences in the work of the mind from one culture to another or from one historical epoch to another. The basic differences are to be sought in materials used for thought. Those materials differ due to knowledge, environment, structure, values and norms, which differ from one continent to another and also may differ even within the same society.

The most important argument in Bowers (1989), in our understanding, is the idea that language influences our perception, memory and judgement. If such a statement is true, it would mean that the understanding of another culture and frequently hinges on our comprehension of the meaning of a few distinctive words or concepts which are called "key symbols" (Ortner, 1979). It would follow that meanings incorporated

into the language are familiar just to the members of the society speaking this particular language. This revises the problem of literacy and cultural identity perceived by Ferdman (1990), who emphasized that becoming literate means developing mastery not only over the processes of reading and writing, but also over the symbolic media of the culture and the ways in which cultural values, beliefs, and norms are represented. Language represents a specific culture and being literate means understanding the culture of a given society.

This statement raises some questions regarding the identity of ethnic group members in the pluralistic societies such as Canada or USA. Ferdman's (1990) assumption was that literacy molds the individual's cultural identity, and that one person can be seen as illiterate in one culture and classified as being quite literate in another. Boekstijn (1988) stressed the complexity of the issue of cultural identity and the dilemma between socio-cultural adaptation and the presentation of identity. His research showed that most problems stem from the fact that familiar communicative symbols and socio-cultural regulations no longer apply. Immigrants feel that they are being negatively evaluated when using another language because their capacities may be very much underestimated by members of the host culture. This may drive them to a feeling of helplessness and depression.

Igoa (1998) stresses loneliness and exhaustion of the immigrant children that need cultural validation.

Adaptation is a difficult process in the sense that it must overcome social distance. Newcomers' limited capacity to express themselves smoothly in the new language causes superficial interactions and prevents them from developing more personal relationships. Prevailing cultural patterns may be radically rejected by immigrant parents who have been acculturated in another society, but accepted by the children born and so-

cialized in the new country and attending schools in the new country. Consequently, a lack of contact between parents and children (obviously a negative factor) influences a child's development and the process of learning at school.

A good example for necessary retention of the heritage language can be the story of Richard Rodriguez (1983) as described in his autobiography. His major problem was alienation and struggle when he went to English school where his Spanish background was not acknowledged. His developing proficiency in English and loss of Spanish cost him emotional separation from his relatives and his culture.

The position of retentionalists who believe in the importance of teaching heritage language is justified by the fact that integration of newcomers without giving them a chance to preserve their language and culture may provoke discrepancies between the behavior and values of children and their parents.

However one necessary digression is that of Shapiro (1977), who claims that, although language and culture shape our behavior, people with a similar educational background are still related among the cultures. What really counts is their thinking skills and abilities to understand concepts incorporated in different cultures.

Schooling and Language

An important problem may arise when immigrant children experience "culture shock" but try to keep their own identity. This situation may provoke alienation and tension or a feeling of inferiority. Ferdman (1990) identified this in the following statement:

"The individual is faced with making a choice that has implications for his or her acquisition of reading and writing skills, as well as for his or her relationship to particular texts and the symbols they contain. The students must either adopt the perspective of the school, at the risk of developing a negative component

to his or her cultural identity, or else resist these externally imposed activities and meanings, at the risk of becoming alienated from the school." (p.195)

Ferdman (1990) sees the educational system as a great equalizer and the institution that can and should provide citizens with the tools they need to be productive members of a society. He emphasized that school should help children in integration and adaptation to the major culture. This is possible when children at school learn material based on the new system of symbols through the rational model of teaching. This model is derived from the analytic tradition in philosophy (Shapiro, 1977). In this model a man is seen as both symbol user and rational being. The main assumption is that thinking and language are distinctive human traits. According to the rational theory, teaching occurs only when changes are brought in the ability of students to perform human actions, and a teacher must be sure that when such a change occurs it occurs due to reasons which the students accept.

After all, Lambert (1984) stressed that the process of learning a foreign language depends not only on intellectual capacity and language aptitude but also on the learner's perceptions and beliefs about the other ethnolinguistic group, the willingness to identify and adopt the aspect of behavior, linguistic and nonlinguistic qualities that characterize the other group (p.239). The problem must be faced, since according to Spradley (1979):

"People use cultural systems of meaning to organize their behavior and interpret experience but cultural knowledge is more than a collection of symbols [...]. It is an intricately patterned system of symbols which may include objects such as a flag, a gesture such as waving one's hand, a place such as a church or events such as a wedding. They are all parts of a system of symbols." (p.97)

By learning the language and meaning of expressions, a child associates and assimilates different values and norms. In the case of children with different cultural backgrounds it is important that teachers understand the symbols of the culture in which the early learning occurred and which are part of a child's heritage, since children's views of other people guide them to ask questions about their own heritage.

Language and the Thought Process

There are conflicting views on language acquisition among scholars: Chomsky's theory (innatism), Piaget's (generative), or Vygotsky's (social psychologism). Chomsky (1980) believes that linguistic structures are hereditary and the role of culture and knowledge is not a basic one. For Vygotsky (1962) speech and thought come from different roots: there is a prelinguistic phase in the use of thought and preintellectual phase in the use of speech.

For Piaget (1979), language arises from the sensory-motor mechanisms that reach deeper than the linguistic reality. Goodman (1973) stresses that language is an essential part of a culture and childhood and, in spite of the variations between languages, children learn with ease whatever might be the linguistic pattern of their culture (p. 22).

Benjamin Whorf (1956), an American specialist on Indian languages, has stated that a language shapes our thoughts. The same opinion is shared by Goodman (1973) who has emphasized that values orientation and cognitive styles are closely related to a given language and that ethnic children may be linguistically ill-equipped for achievement in nonethnic and middle class schools. Shapiro's (1977) view that language influences what we say and how we behave is justified in the sense that language influences our perception, conceptualization and understanding of reality. Each language employs the semantic connotations and cultural signifiers preva-

lent in a given society. Languages describe reality in different ways and give different significance to the behavior of people.

On the other hand, it is also true that there exist universalities that have been found across different languages. For example, a study by Charles Osgood (1975) indicates the occurrence of three dimensions of meaning (the evaluative factor - represented by "good-bad"; the potency factor - represented by a scale "strong-weak"; the activity factor - represented by scales like "fast-slow") in all studied languages. Other phenomena such as the use of physical properties in describing the people (example given: "John is a very cold person") or of "phonetic symbolism" to explain the relationship between the sound and the word was also found in different languages studied by Osgood.

Bowers' (1989) view of language as a collection of patterns that regulate a social life is close to that of Symbolic Interactionism, seeing society as made up of interacting individuals who are symbol users. Each person's reality is dependent on his/her perspective and it is described by words. Most human actions are regarded as symbolic. Words are symbols and actions are symbols. According to Charon (1989):

"A symbol is a social object used for communication to self or for communication to others and to self." (p.41)

Symbols are developed socially through interactions. It is through symbols that individuals are socialized, share a culture within a group. Social life depends on symbols in the sense that all actions are symbolically coded and created by the interactions between individuals and groups. Members of each society develop an identity which defines them as members of a particular group. As Ferdman (1990) stressed :

"Cultural identity involves a shared sense of cultural features that helps to define and characterize a group. These groups' attributes are important not just for their functional

value, but also as symbols which represent their identification." (p.190)

Human knowledge is an effect of many factors but in the course of our study of symbols and language, we have become convinced that our knowledge is based on symbolically coded information, which describes realities in different ways. Our observations which are close to that of Goodman (1973), Spradley (1979) and Charon (1989) has led us to the conclusion that the world is organized by systems of symbols which in turn depend on culture and are incorporated into the language.

For Shapiro (1977), the problem of determining our general comprehension of a social life and reality can be explained in terms of linguistic propositions and his reasoning inevitably leads to the deeper fundamentals of the structure of a language.

Heritage Language Program

A glance at recent history might be instructive. In 1975 the Toronto Board of Education established a research group called the *Work Group on Multicultural Programs*. After consultations with ethnic groups, the Work Group recommended that immigrant children be encouraged to learn their mother tongue. The opposition raised two issues: the first was, that immigrants should accept the educational and social system in the society and maintain their language at home; and the second was that maintenance of a heritage language would impede the acquisition of English.

In 1977, the Government of Ontario instituted the Heritage Language Program which could be provided if requested from community groups (Cummins, 1984). The Heritage Language Curriculum Guide published in Saskatoon (Boyer, 1984) pointed out that both the communicative approach (based on ability to converse or correspond with a native speaker) which was taken in order to develop this curriculum and the choice of

guage) receive 90 percent of their instruction in the minority language. This process helps both groups since each is serving as peer tutors for each other. The number of hours of instruction in minority language decreases until in the 6th grade children are able to use the majority language to learn mathematics, social studies and language arts. According to Thomas and Collier (1998) this model is more successful than 50/50 when students are getting 50 percent of instruction in one language and 50 percent in another language.

In the USA the English Plus as opposed to the English Only movement stresses the importance of the English as the best for national interest and a great resource (Ovando and Collier, 1998, p.34).

Another important aspect for bilingual education was given by Cummins (1997) such as the global market economy:

The reality is that any student who graduates from grade 12 with access to only one language is seriously disadvantaged in the global economic market in comparison to those who have multilingual skills (in Ovando and Collier, 1998, p.X).

Toward a Synthesis

We would like to begin our summary by referring to More's statement (1989), that "the complicated phenomenon of education is a group of activities going on at various logical levels - "logical" in the sense that each higher level arises out of and is dependent on the one below it." (p.7).

This idea is further developed in Igoa's (1995) threefold cultural/academic/psychological philosophy called CAP with goals of facilitating the child's maintenance of authenticity and connection to his or her native culture, academic achievement, and sense of feeling fully alive in school (p.7).

In the case of children with different cultural backgrounds it is important that teachers understand the symbols of the culture within which early learning occurred. Programs should also develop children's participation

and exploration of their own symbolic thinking. Consideration should be given to children coming from a different cultural background. Schools should give children chance to learn their heritage language and be encouraged to understand their roots. If not children can become restless, fragmented in cultural conflict with themselves (Igoa, 1998, p.10).

An understanding of the inner world of immigrant children called by Igoa (1998) "dual dialogue retrospection" is based on an understanding of the inner world of immigrant children and designing programs helping them feel a sense of their own power and developing their talents to the fullest potential. (p. 70)

Of course full participation in social life is possible only with the acquisition of the dominant language in the society. Literacy is a form of socialization and the members of linguistic minority groups in order to achieve an entrance into the social, cultural, political and educational life should have the capacity to communicate within the broader society and become literate in its culture. But how it could be best achieved?

Collier (1995) stresses that good bilingual programs have five characteristics:

- English and language minority students learn through each other's languages;
- It is a perception among staff, students, and parents that it is a "gifted and talented" program with high expectations for students' performance;
- Equal status is given to two languages;
- A close school cooperation of parents from both languages exists;
- Continuous support is provided for staff development;
- This program emphasizes whole language approaches, natural language acquisition through all content areas, cooperative and cognitive complexity of the curriculum for all proficiency levels (pp.10-11).

An important aspect of Ginshi's (1992) experience in Machwash (Arizona) bilingual school was helping the staff to understand

that essentially what individuals learn in one language they then apply to other languages.

Cummins and Swain (1992) suggested three principles underlying the operation of successful bilingual education program such as:

- maintenance of the first language in school as the essential psychological and sociological support for linguistic and academic learning;
- separate use of the two languages for instructional purposes;
- creation of the conditions that will foster positive forms of bilingualism (p. 110).

Bilingual education helps children to learn the value of each other's knowledge and life experiences leading to meaningful respect and collaboration that last a lifetime (Thomas and Collier, 1998, p. 26).

It is helping immigrant children stay connected with their parents and relatives, feel secure and acknowledged.

NorthWhitehead has written (1957) that the fundamental question of scientific philosophy is the harmony between abstract concepts and the feeling of actual experience. This harmony, as it concerns the members of ethnic groups, can be achieved only if the right to hold to one symbolic world and the simultaneous right to integrate into another are recognized.

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